

To You, Two Thousand Years Away

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To You, Two Thousand Years Away

by [preserumping](#)

Summary

If Levi wasn't mistaken, and he wasn't, the green cloak made him a researcher like himself. Two thousand years ago, he had been looking outside the walls the way Levi was now looking in.

"What's your story?" Levi asked the boy in the crystal. As expected, there was no response. He just hung there, eyes closed, heart beating but only just. Levi's words reverberated around the cavern, resonated as a hum, and then fell silent.

Notes

Hello from the distant past! I've gotten a few comments about confusion about some changes I made in this fic vs canon. When this was written in 2013, we only had season 1 and the first 80 or so chapters of the manga. Obviously my speculations now contradict canon, so just be aware of that heading in.

Chapter 1

Levi hated coming out into the field. He preferred his pristine lab where every surface was covered in plastic, dusty manuscripts were restored under microscopes, and no one was allowed to so much as breathe without decking out head to toe in protective gear. The Three Goddesses knew manuscripts from the old days were hard to come by, and no scientist or wealthy collector dared trust anyone else but the world expert with them.

Yet today, Levi was forced to don his hiking boots and come out to an old friend's excavation site, all because she couldn't explain what she had found to him on the phone. She said it had to be seen to be believed, and if it was truly the breakthrough she had made it out to be, Levi would have to agree.

Compared to Levi, Hanji was a different animal entirely. She thrived on dirt. Levi may have known more than anyone alive about every surviving text on Titans and the military of the old days, but Hanji could tell you anything you wanted to know about the earth and the remains inside. Without knowing the two of them went back to their undergraduate days, people would never have suspected she and Levi to be friends. They were even remarkably close for how much their two approaches disagreed on the history of the ancient settlement known today as Eden.

According to written records, there were fifty meter high concentric walls that according to some protected the people within from a race of man-eating giants. There were even remarkably detailed records of their biology, though the beasts seemed to have remained a mystery even to the writers themselves. It all seemed like something out of a fairy tale, and according to physical evidence, it was. The ground did show evidence of walls having stood in three concentric circles, but to date no one had ever found any remains of the giants themselves. According to literature there should be none, as the multi-ton monsters were allegedly said to evaporate postmortem, but most archaeologists merely scoffed at the convenience of such so-called evidence.

Nonetheless, it did seem very odd that although there had clearly been walls, no rubble remained except from the gates. Parts of the buildings within still stood, but the walls themselves had seemingly vanished. Some even thought to question why there would need to be walls in the first place. And then there were the occasional human remains that turned up where whole bones, sometimes even found in articulation, showed evidence of being partially digested. There were many possible explanations for all this, none of them satisfactory to Levi. He might not have been mad enough to buy what the ancient texts claimed wholesale, but he was also sharp enough to spot logical contradictions in modern theories when he saw them. Hanji was in a different boat entirely, falling into the extreme end of the continuum among archaeologists for her faith in the texts' validity.

A dig site stretched in the treeless landscape, but to find Hanji Levi had to go underground. Her dig site was separate because she was one of the few to take the precaution of denying her artifacts sunlight *in situ*. The extra effort had not paid off until recently. When Levi arrived to the entrance to the underground excavation cavern, he was told much to his

vexation that he had to wait. Luckily, it was not long before a dirt-encrusted glove reached through the protective screens and motioned him inside. There was only one person it could belong to.

Zoe Hanji hadn't changed a bit since Levi had last seen her five years ago, dirt and all, but with the notable addition of a pair of night vision goggles pushed up on her forehead. She also wore a stethoscope around her neck, but Levi had the inkling that it was just to show off that she had received her doctorate. She took off her filthy glove to shake his hand, but it was equally as dirty and vibrating with too much caffeine. Levi gave the hand a look to communicate his distaste but shook it nonetheless.

"I'm so glad you could make it!" she chimed as he wiped off his fingers on his handkerchief. "This discovery is going to change everything. *Everything!* Come on, come on, let me show you. Watch your step."

"We'll see about that," Levi replied as he followed her down a ramp toward the real excavation site. He wouldn't admit it, but the excitement was infectious. The first set of curtains blocked out most sunlight but there was still enough to make out vague shapes. Further ahead, a second set of curtains blocked out the rest.

"Wait here a minute for your eyes to adjust," Hanji instructed when they got to it. "I'll go find you a pair of specs." She tapped the night vision goggles on her head and scuttled off.

Levi watched her rummage through a storage crate. By the time she found him a pair that fit, his eyes had not yet adjusted fully. The goggles turned everything green but were a substantial improvement to the naked eye. Hanji ran back to grab a tablet off one of the tables.

"You ready?" she asked as her hand hovered over the curtain.

"Let's get it over with," Levi sighed. Hanji grinned, flipped down her goggles, and lead the way.

They passed by groups of researchers chipping away at some dirt. Hanji greeted them all by name but didn't stop to chat. Instead, she busied herself explaining to Levi everything he already knew.

"Right now we're about ten meters down, which was street level two thousand years ago. We're actually at the very southern-most point of Eden in one of the fringe districts of the first wall. The southern one, to be exact--"

"Shiganshina," Levi clarified for her.

"Yes, exactly!" Hanji clapped. "I knew inviting you here would be a good idea. Anyway, as you'd expect from anything past the second wall, everything was abandoned way before Eden itself was. The thing is, the pieces of the gate here are scattered all over the place. Nobody's ever bothered to calculate where the gate was *supposed* to be."

"And?"

“And we plotted all the pieces and crunched some numbers assuming the events here went down as the accounts say they did, and we found the original location!”

“*And?*”

“And *this*,” Hanji said as they ducked under a low hanging ceiling into a small chamber. Inside was a boulder perhaps three or four meters in diameter.

“Wow,” Levi responded with his usual level of enthusiasm. “It’s a big-ass rock.”

Hanji’s enthusiasm was not deterred. “See, that’s what I thought too, at first. We’ve actually found a similar setup in fringe distri--”

“Trost.”

“Yes, Trost. Big boulder where the gate should be. But the difference is that that rock was actually of the same material that all the rest of the gates are made of. This one you couldn’t crack with a steel pickaxe if you tried.”

At this Levi raised an eyebrow. Now she had his attention.

“Same here,” Hanji continued. “The stuff you see on the outside here isn’t actually part of the rock itself, or should I say crystal. Hard rocky outside, harder clear crystal inside. We had to order sandpaper with chips of diamond in it to get this crust off. That’s on its way now because I went ahead and scanned it with everything we had to see if there was anything inside. You’ll never believe this.”

She held out the tablet she had brought with her earlier. Levi tapped the screen to wake the device and was presented with a grainy picture of what could have been an x-ray. At the center of the boulder there was some kind of mass. He zoomed in closer and squinted. When the pixels loaded fully, Levi nearly dropped the tablet. He looked wide-eyed from the picture to the boulder itself to Hanji. She was beaming.

“We’re pretty sure he’s human,” she said. “I mean, we can’t be 100% since no one knows what a Titan looks like. It might be hard to tell with him curled up in the fetal position like that, but we know for sure he’s under two meters. Pretty average morphology, generally speaking. We don’t want to risk exposing him to the light just in case, though. We got the sex from the pelv--”

“So you’re telling me that what you have in there is the remains of an Eden-era human?” It took a lot of control for Levi not to stammer. Crystal like this was rare, almost non-existent. It matched the description of the armor certain specialized types of Titans could produce. Few records spoke of it, but Levi nursed the pet theory that perhaps the walls were made of the stuff as well. It would explain why they were missing, evaporated like the titans themselves, but he had absolutely nothing to back it up. How a human could get inside would be an even greater mystery.

In response to his question, Hanji grinned and motioned Levi over to the stone itself. She held her stethoscope out to him and shushed him up when he tried to ask.

“Just listen,” she said.

Levi put in the ear tips and pressed the diaphragm to the rock. At first silence, then a very quiet thump-thump. He gave Hanji a questioning look, but she held up a finger for him to wait. A couple seconds later, the same sound. A little later, again. Quiet. Regular. Levi tore the tubes out of his ears

“What am I listening to?” he demanded.

Hanji beamed like she had been waiting for him to ask.

“A heartbeat,” she answered.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Levi left insisting he be told the moment the sandpaper arrived. A few days later he was awakened by a phone call and was pulling on his boots the minute he hung up. By the time he completed the drive to the dig site, the removal of the outer layers of the crystal had begun without him, but there was not yet much to see. It was Levi's suggestion to put torches inside the cavern. Titans did go into a dormancy phase in the absence of sunlight, he said, but fire had been used by researchers two thousand years ago to discover that very fact. No one wanted to risk untested electric light just to be on the safe side, so lanterns were quickly brought in to illuminate the cavern.

Now lit up, the shadowy outline of a body could be seen suspended in the center of the clear crystal. Levi had known it was a soldier as soon as he had seen the imaging Hanji had shown him on his first visit. Back in his lab there were sketches of the designs for the military's grappling gear, but Levi could only pray that the shadows that appeared to be strapped to the young man's sides were what he thought they were. Visuals now confirmed it to be the most intact set anyone had ever seen

The most exciting thing was of course the young man himself. He couldn't have been older than his early twenties at most. The things he would have to say about the manuscripts Levi had dedicated his life to translating! The translation bit was the reason that Hanji called him over in the first place, though Levi had to remind her it was a bit ambitious to think they could pull the young man out alive. His two thousand year old pulse itself was a miracle. Hanji wasn't deterred.

Levi also had to break it to Hanji that while he could read Eden's written language, he couldn't even begin to know how it sounded when spoken except that it might come out as a mix of archaic German and late Latin. For that Hanji called in another friend of hers, an American linguist named Smith, who came from the breed of nutjob that worked in pure guess-work to piece together how dead languages would sound. Even with the American on the way and hopes of speaking with the boy slim to none, Levi stayed around. Undying curiosity kept him tethered to this horrible place of dirt and dust. The texts waiting for him back home in his spotless, temperature controlled lab paled to what was about to be uncovered here. If he was lucky.

The power sanding process proved to be an arduous one. By the end of the first day Levi accepted the offer to stay with the rest of the excavation crew. Hanji even offered him her cot, but Levi said he would make do with a sleeping bag. After tossing and turning for several hours, he lit a lantern and went in to check on the young man in the crystal. Over the course of Levi's absence from the site, the young man had come to be known as Adam despite being neither the first nor the only man ever found in Eden.

He was only partially visible from standing height, but when Levi spread his sleeping bag on the ground at the base of the crystal he could look up and see Adam in his entirety. He looked

like he was asleep, which some might say he was. Levi thought he looked more like a diagram in a health textbook the way he was suspended upside down with his knees pulled up to his chest.

Even his clothes had preserved perfectly. If Levi wasn't mistaken, and he wasn't, the green cloak made him a researcher like himself. Two thousand years ago, he had been looking outside the walls the way Levi was now looking in. Maybe Levi had even read something of his. It was an eerie thought.

"What's your story?" Levi asked the comatose relic. As expected, there was no response. Adam just hung there, eyes closed, heart beating but only just. Levi's words reverberated around the cavern, resonated as a hum, and then fell silent.

Over the course of the next week Levi watched more of the outer crust come off. There was talk of boring a thin channel into the crystal to insert a camera to get a better look, maybe even take samples of fabric or, if possible, DNA, but the risk at this point was just too great.

"This crystal is supposedly produced by Titans' bodies from thin air, yes?" Hanji asked Levi one day.

"That is the literal interpretation," he replied, unsure of where this was going.

"So it's organic."

"I thought you already confirmed it was carbon-based."

"Yeah yeah," Hanji swatted her hand. "But do you think we can carbon date it?"

Radiocarbon or C14 dating exploited the fact that the atmosphere contained trace amounts of the radioactive carbon isotope C14. Plants incorporated this carbon into their bodies during photosynthesis, other living things ate the plants and were eaten in turn, and so on. When a living thing died, the amount of C14 in its body was proportional to the atmosphere but would decay over time at a known rate. By measuring how much was left, archaeologists determine when a thing died, or in Levi's case, when the tree that paper was made from was cut down so long as it was less than 30,000 years ago.

"How do you plan to calibrate it?" Levi asked after thinking it over. It was a brilliant idea if it could work, and of course if the legends were true and the crystal did appear literally out of the air. It was quite the stretch.

"I'll figure something out!" Hanji grinned and just like that a possible absolute date was on the way.

Work continued on feverishly around the crystal, but every night Levi found himself unable to sleep without sneaking in to see Adam. He sat under torchlight for hours marveling at his sleeping face, the delicate way his fingers curled into a limp fist in front of his beating heart, the way his hair hung suspended in a fantom wind. He didn't tell a soul about these excursions.

Toward the end of the week the team had removed most of the crust from the front of the crystal. The rest was to be left on for future research, but for the time being Adam was clearly visible. The same day that the sanding was abandoned, the American linguist finally showed up. He looked remarkably well put together after a fifteen hour flight. He spoke with a slight accent but otherwise quite well.

“It is an honor,” he told Levi when he shook his hand. “I am a fan of your work.” Levi was not surprised. He was a big name in historical linguistics. On the contrary, Levi had never heard of this American.

“Doctor Smith, was it?”

“Just Irwin is fine.”

Levi wasn’t present when Hanji took him to see Adam. When he saw her again at dinner, Irwin was not with her.

“He’s asleep,” she explained. “Jet lag, you know? He’ll be joining us all for breakfast though, I’m sure. We can talk more with him then. I think you all will like him a lot. He’s very... driven. Once he sets his mind on something, he’s a force to be reckoned with.”

Levi didn’t think much of it. As usual he waited until everyone was asleep that night to grab a lantern and slip out of the tent. He climbed silently down the ramp into the bowels of the excavation, through the corridor that had once been a bustling city street, and into the cavern with the crystal.

He stayed there watching in silence longer than usual, so much so that he didn’t realize he had begun to nod off until there was a shifting of stone under someone’s feet behind him. He rounded on the intruder.

“I hope I am not interrupting,” Irwin said as he ducked into the cavern.

“Not at all,” Levi replied, miffed. He did feel intruded upon, but he would never admit it.

“Quite a find, is he not?” Irwin said, standing in front of the crystal and clasping his hands behind his back.

“Quite,” Levi agreed out of politeness, but his tone gave away how little he was interested in the conversation.

Irwin either didn’t notice or didn’t care. “Are you looking forward to speaking with him?”

Levi sighed. “I know they do it differently in America, but here archaeological material belongs to the state. We can’t just crack him open. First there’s going to be a huge debate and I’m willing to bet they’re going to opt for preserving him the way he is. They always do. The fact that there is a life involved will only stretch the talks on for months, maybe years.”

Irwin nodded and listened politely, and when it was his turn to talk asked, “would you agree with their decision?”

"I wouldn't have a choice."

"That is not what I asked." There was a glint in his eye that made Levi consider his next answer very carefully.

"...No," he admitted after some time. "I would not."

Irwin had turned back to face the crystal, so Levi couldn't see his reaction if there was one. It felt like he was talking to a different man than the one he met the day before. This one had much more going on under the surface. Levi wasn't sure if he liked it.

"What time is it?" Irwin asked suddenly.

Levi checked his watch. He was horrified to see he had more than just dozed off. "4:51."

"Excellent," Irwin replied. "Would you be willing to help me set some things up?"

Levi had the feeling there was no point in asking for clarification. As an answer, he stood up and brushed himself off. Irwin gave him an inkling of a smile and lead the way.

In the storage area between the two curtains, Irwin pulled out one of the suitcases he had brought with him. When he zipped it open, Levi needed no further explanation of what they were about to do. He wanted to ask if Irwin was sure about this, but as he watched the linguist carefully unpack the mirrors and stands he realized the answer was obvious.

Outside, the sky was just starting to brighten. Levi estimated it would be another twenty minutes before the sun actually peeked over the horizon. In the meantime, he and Irwin set the mirrors up at all angles down the excavation site. Not a word passed between them until they were finished.

"I'll take care of the rest," Irwin said when the last mirror was placed at the doorway of Adam's chamber. He put his hand on Levi's shoulder and fixed him with a look of all seriousness. "I leave the choice up to you." Then he disappeared.

Levi glanced at Adam for an explanation, but he was as quiet as ever. A few minutes later, the corridor behind Levi lit up with the day's first sunlight.

"Now, before the sun moves," Irwin called from somewhere far around the corner.

Levi swallowed the lump in his throat and tilted the mirror in his hands to catch the light. A beam of it appeared on the ceiling of Adam's chamber. He tilted it down slowly and stopped just before he let the light touch the crystal. Adam didn't move. The world was perfectly still. Levi suddenly understood the choice Irwin was talking about.

He took a deep breath. In the back of his mind he knew this might not even work. Every way you looked at it, the boy was human. There should be no reason for him to react to sunlight. But if it did work... the results would be revolutionary. This was no chance to pass up, if Levi had the guts to go through with it, that was.

He edged the beam of light lower until it nudged the edge of the crystal. Nothing. Adam didn't move. Levi forced himself to exhale and continued. More the crystal lit up. Still no effect. He took another deep breath and pushed the light onto Adam's foot. His hands were causing the beam shake. He kept the light there on his boot for a good several seconds, but Adam's state did not change.

It might not even work, Levi reminded himself again. But on the other hand, it very well could. He had to ask himself, could he live the rest of his life not knowing?

The answer was probably yes, but he didn't want to.

One last calming breath, and Levi turned the light onto Adam's face. A second passed, then two, then three. Levi held his breath. Four. Five. Six. Nothing. Nothing was happening. Seven. Eight. Nine. It wasn't going to work.

Ten.

Levi dropped the mirror. It shattered at his feet. The morning light streamed into the cavern undirected now, lighting up the crystal and the pair of luminous blue eyes inside. Levi only caught a glimpse of them before the crystal began to hiss violently. Steam jetteted against the cavern walls and Levi knew it only had one place to go. He bolted.

Down the hall he could see Irwin standing by another one of the mirrors.

"Run!" he shouted at him, but by the look in the linguist's eyes he could tell the steam was not something they could escape on foot. He remained bolted to the spot, wide-eyed. Levi tried to catch his arm as he ran past, but Irwin was so much taller than him that even Levi's full weight didn't move him from the spot. His eyes were still fixed behind Levi, but Levi didn't dare look.

Without warning he was heaved against the cave wall. Levi squeezed his eyes shut ready to feel the searing heat but was instead pinned to the wall by something solid and heavy. He struggled only until the wave of heat and moisture overtook him. He wanted to scream but there was no air, only heat and humidity and darkness as the wave of steam knocked down mirrors and blew out torches alike.

When oxygen returned it was so dark Levi couldn't tell the difference between when his eyes were open and when they were shut. Whatever had pressed him into the wall had shielded him from the worst of it. He could hear Irwin breathing heavily directly above him. Levi rummaged in his pockets for his phone, and when the screen lit up, his suspicions were proven correct. He had to drop his phone to catch the man as he slumped against him. His back felt raw and sticky with more than sweat.

"The boy," Irwin breathed as Levi lowered him to the ground so the shoulder furthest from the blast was leaning against the wall. "Check on the boy."

"He can wait," Levi retorted. He was dying to know Adam's state himself, but he was also scared of what he might find left of him. In the meantime, Irwin required his attention.

With strength Levi didn't expect, the American grabbed onto his collar and yanked him forward to within an inch of face.

"Check. On the boy," he growled.

Levi didn't need to be ordered a third time. He scooped his phone off the floor and felt his way back to Adam's chamber. It was even hotter than the corridor outside and on the other side Levi could still hear a faint hissing of steam. The phone light was of little help; he couldn't see more than a few inches through the fog.

He suddenly recalled the accounts he had read of soldiers describing what it was like to traverse outside the Walls in low visibility, knowing that a Titan could be less than an arm's length away. The boy had responded to sunlight. For all Levi knew, he and Irwin had just unleashed something that was never meant to be woken up. At any moment, a hand could reach out from the gloom.

When Levi's foot nudged something soft on the ground, he nearly jumped out of his skin. Tucking half the phone into his collar to free up his hands, he steadied his face and crouched down.

The boy lay in a heap, unconscious but seemingly unharmed. He put up no resistance when Levi rolled him onto his back. The historian in him cringed at the act of touching him with bare hands. To think of the evidence he was contaminating! But there was no helping it. He checked for a pulse and leaned in by the boy's mouth to feel for breath. Both were present and steady, although Levi was no judge of what was considered normal. He flinched when the boy spoke.

The voice was raspy from disuse, barely a whimper, and in an accent Levi could not pin down. His eyelashes fluttered from the effort of keeping his eyes open.

"*Decane*," he wheezed. Levi barely caught it and didn't have an inkling of what it meant. Irwin should be the one to be here, not him. He knew the grammar on paper, but stringing it together into speech was a completely different matter.

The boy was reaching up his hand. Instead of saying anything, Levi just took it. He didn't know what else to do. A moment later, the boy's eyelids fluttered shut and his head lolled to the side. In the distance, Levi could hear alarmed voices calling his name.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: [Now with fanart!](#)

EDIT2: [Here too!](#)

Chapter 3

“I am *certain* that is all he said,” Levi repeated for fifth time.

He was sitting in a nice, clean chair in a nice, clean hospital room. Irwin was lying on his stomach on the bed beside him. His back was covered in bandages and there was a morphine tube stuck in his left arm. Levi tried to avoid looking. He could have well ended up in the same state himself, but thanks to Irwin he managed to walk away with only first degree burns on one arm and one hell of a guilt debt. He had been discharged two days ago.

“Why would he just say *decane*? It does not make any sense,” Irwin complained.

“It’s a military rank,” Levi explained. “To the Edenites--and the Romans of course-- it meant something like Corporal or Lance Captain. He was dressed in military uniform. What else is there?”

“Imagine yourself in his position,” Irwin sighed. “One minute... Heaven knows what is happening. The next minute you are waking up underground with a stranger wearing clothes you have never seen and holding a mobile phone, which you well know would not have existed. What would you say in that situation?”

Levi didn’t say anything.

“You would ask where you were. Who the stranger was. What year it was, even,” Irwin went on. “The last thing you would care about was that this stranger knew your military rank.”

“It wasn’t his rank,” Levi corrected. “He used the vocative form. He was addressing someone else as *decanus*.”

“That makes even less sense.”

Levi didn’t need to be reminded of that fact. “He was probably disoriented.”

Irwin seemed to begrudgingly accept this explanation, though neither man was entirely satisfied with it. Before either could come up with anything better, Hanji kicked down the door.

“He’s awake!” she announced so loudly the girl who shared Irwin’s room, now minus appendix, stirred from her slumber. Levi was on his feet before she could so much as look around in confusion.

Adam had been asleep since he was brought to the hospital three days ago. Hanji had been storming around furiously since, trying to get permission to order a barrage of medical tests performed on him, but he was clearly no minor and Hanji was clearly not his guardian, so all bets were off. Now that he was awake the real research could begin.

Irwin groaned. As much as he disliked having Adam and not being able to study him, it was no secret that he had hoped the boy would stay asleep until he was well enough to move. Levi took the linguist's laptop from the nightstand and placed it next to him as apologetically as he could.

"You'll hear every word," he assured as he picked up his bag, and then he and Hanji were off.

Adam had been given his own room in the quarantine wing of the hospital. While there were no tests performed on him, he had been injected with a number of vaccines required for all persons in the country and a handful for diseases that were now extinct. Precautions had to be taken.

Levi curled and uncurled his fist on the walk over. Next to him, Hanji was chatting animatedly, but he was only half-listening. He had so many questions but he couldn't just ramble them off. He had to pace himself. He had to have a plan.

"Wait out here," he told Hanji when they arrived at the door. There was a nurse there to meet them with a key.

Hanji visibly deflated. "I get it, I get it," she pouted. "Can you wait for me to run back to Irwin's room to watch?"

Levi pursed his lips. "Hurry up."

The nurse that unlocked the room for Levi wished him luck in a manner that suggested he would need it. Levi couldn't imagine why. It was unlikely Adam had been awake more than the five minutes it took Hanji to come running. When he walked in, however, the boy was already struggling against the restraints keeping his arms and legs tethered to the bed. When he saw Levi come in he went rigid at once and immediately unleashed a non-stop torrent of gibberish.

Levi froze like a deer in headlights. This was hardly giving Irwin every word. His first instinct was to tell the boy to shut up, and he did so the only way he knew how, by pressing a finger to his lips. It silenced him instantly. This could turn out easier than expected.

Levi held the same finger up as indication to wait. The boy nodded. Just like that, a thread of understanding was created spanning two millennia. Levi didn't have time to marvel though. Quickly as he could, he set up the laptop, camera, and speaker at other end of the room. He had the screen tilted so the boy couldn't see him adjust the video zoom and dial up Irwin. As the call connected, Levi studied the boy's face. It was so bizarre to see it moving, to have those bright eyes follow his every movement.

The linguist's and Hanji's faces came on screen.

"Do you have visuals?" Levi asked.

"He's *perfect*," Hanji mewled. Levi took that as a yes.

"I'm setting up audio now," he told them and moved to retrieve the external mic. Adam flinched away when he tried to clip it to his hospital gown.

"Tell him it won't hurt," Levi said into the microphone. On the other side of the room, Irwin's voice translated from the speaker. Adam looked quizzically from Levi to the speaker to the mic.

"And not to worry. I won't hurt him either."

Irwin translated. Adam didn't relax any, but Levi didn't really expect him to. In his situation, he wouldn't have relaxed either, he figured. When he had the mic pinned, he set a tape recorder down on the bedside table and hit the button to start

"Fifteenth of June," he dictated. "Twenty thirteen. Time is 14:38. Subject is codename 'Adam.' This is Levi --"

The subject interrupted him with what sounded like a question. It ended with that word again. *Decane*. Levi looked to the camera.

There was a turning of pages on the other end. "He wants to know what's going on," Irwin explained.

Of course he did. "Ask him his name."

After more consulting of notes, Irwin did. Adam seemed startled at the question, almost hurt. Then the look disappeared as quickly as it had appeared and was replaced by one of understanding.

"Eren Jaeger," the boy said very clearly.

Levi choked. "Did he just say Jaeger?"

"Yes," Irwin answer. "Why?"

"Ask him if he knows a Grisha Jaeger." Levi's heart was pounding in his chest. The air in the room suddenly felt solid.

Eren looked confused but nodded in response to the question, and after a pause added something else.

"His father," Irwin translated.

Levi stared at the boy. The coincidence was astounding, though maybe not so much considering where he had been found. Grisha Jaeger of Shiganshina District was one of the most prolific authors on Titan biology, the only one whose work was found completely intact outside the government collection, and certainly the most unique in his research questions. Levi had gotten his hands on some of the man's original manuscripts and had learned more in that one night than he had from all the military records put together.

He had also learned the monstrosities mankind was capable of.

“Levi? Levi!” He became aware that Hanji was saying something, and had been for a while. “Levi, you’re white as a sheet.” Eren was saying something too, but Levi suddenly didn’t want to be in the same room as him.

“I need some air,” he mumbled. The door was horrifically far away and seemed further with each step.

Hanji found him a few minutes later sitting outside in the hall on the floor.

“What happened in there? Who’s Grisha Jaeger?” She sounded more concerned than Levi had ever heard her. He must have looked terrible. “Actually, hold that thought. I’ll get you some water.”

She came back with a plastic cup and sat down next to Levi. He downed the whole glass while trying to think of where to even begin.

“He called himself--” Levi barely recognized his own voice. He cleared his throat. “He called himself a medical doctor. He did treat people.” He paused to twirl the empty cup between his fingers. “He also experimented on his patients and never told them.”

“Experimented how?” Hanji asked.

“He was trying to create some kind of human-Titan hybrid, I think. He came up with a serum, but it only took if the subject was prepubescent, the younger the better.” The words put a sour taste in Levi’s mouth. “Kids. He was using kids. He never told any of the parents. They trusted him and he mutilated their children.” Jaeger’s notes had been as dry as the paper they were written on. He never once showed remorse.

“You don’t think...”

“What am I supposed to think?” Levi raised his voice without realizing as he gestured to the room behind him. “The sunlight, the steam... Jaeger never mentioned he had a son in his notes. I’ll tell you one thing though, he managed to create a super-soldier. And you know what he did to it when regular visits as the family doctor weren’t enough? He had the parents *murdered*, made it look like an accident, and took the kid in as his own to keep a closer eye on it! Damn it, Zoe, I wouldn’t put it past a man like that to do it twice, or hell, just skip the middleman and experiment on his own son!”

“You’re yelling,” Hanji whispered.

Levi wanted to punch something. He held up the plastic cup as if to pitch it at the wall. He didn’t know if he was angry at Jaeger or himself. When his hand shook he lowered it and Hanji put her hand on his shoulder.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to call it a day.”

Levi shook her off and stood up. “I don’t need your sympathy,” he said through his teeth. Hanji had little practice hiding her emotions, so it was obvious when she tried not to look

hurt. Levi had just enough time to feel bad for snapping at her before she smiled, stood up, and gave his good shoulder a playful punch.

“Sure you don’t. Ready?”

Levi rubbed his shoulder. That punch could have stood to be a little more playful, but he wasn’t about to go around thinking he didn’t deserve it.

“Ready.” This time, he held the door open behind him for Hanji to follow. Eren was where he left him, staring at Levi and Hanji like he wasn’t sure if he was in trouble.

“What did we miss?” Hanji asked the webcam.

“Nothing much,” Irwin’s voice answered. “I asked him his age, what year he thought it was, that sort of thing.”

“And?” Levi asked.

“He says he is eighteen. Thinks the year is 853.” Eren looked a bit older than eighteen, Levi thought, but the mortality rate of the Scouting Legion probably made it a pretty stressful place.

“Tell him it’s closer to what he would call 2853,” Levi instructed as he sat down at the bedside again. “2867 to be exact.” Hanji hung back by the door and bit her lip with glee, eyes darting between all parties in the room.

Levi could tell when Irwin was done translating because Eren’s jaw dropped. He opened and closed it a few times like a fish. Meanwhile, Levi was sorting through the numbers in his head.

If he was eighteen in the year 853, in 850 he would be fifteen, old enough to join the military. Except after the events of 845, the militia lowered the age of enrollment to thirteen, which Eren would have been in 848. This would have put him on track to graduate in 850.

“Ask him what year he graduated in.”

Irwin did. Levi was right, which meant there was a very good chance that...

“Was he at Trost?”

Eren nodded. Hanji sucked in a shaky gasp. She was in heaven. Levi was pretty pleased himself but kept his face flat and emotionless.

“Well then,” he checked to make sure his tape recorder was still going. “I’ve read a couple of accounts. Let’s hear what can you remember.”

Five hours later, Levi let himself collapse on Hanji’s cot. He was far too exhausted to care about the grime. Hanji dropped down near his head and whistled. It was a bit more excitement than the two of them were used to.

They had in their custody a living, breathing, talking Edenite, and one that had seen Shiganshina's Fall and the Reclamation of Trost at that. It was more than any researcher could have hoped to achieve in a hundred careers. Unfortunately, to the outside observer Eren would have seemed rather delusional when he claimed he could turn into a Titan. Levi made him swear never to tell anyone, much less use the power, much to Hanji's disappointment. He didn't want to believe the boy, but with a man like Grisha Jaeger for a father there was no knowing what Eren might or might not be capable of. It was best to be cautious.

They also had to spend a good deal of time convincing him that Levi was not his military superior. Before college, Levi had been drafted for one year like every other male citizen, but he spent the whole time turning aerial photographs into topographical maps. He had never had inferiors, much less seen combat. Eren tried to get Hanji to verify his side of the story, but when he saw that she was as confused as Levi, he screamed something that Irwin said didn't need translating.

Toward the end of the talk, after Levi had finished explaining to him why he needed to sign the medical papers and unbind his right hand to let him, Eren began to ask about his teammates. No one recognized any of their names, much less what their fates were, but Eren said he might and requested pen and paper.

Hanji pulled the crudely drawn maps out now and studied the first one. Levi had to reach over and flip the paper so it wasn't upside down. It was a large circle labeled SINA, clearly meant to be the innermost of the old walls. Inside it was a square that Levi could only assume was the palace. Eren had neglected to include a compass rose, but as long as the paper was held so that the wall's name could be read, the top of the page could be assumed to be north.

Between the edges of the square and circle was a large X. After hearing the story of how he had been found, Eren had been pretty adamant that he be taken to where the X was, but Irwin had a hard time translating why. Hanji reassured enthusiastically she would look for the spot but said nothing about letting Eren come along.

The second map was much more difficult to discern. The thing that looked like a target in the upper corner was probably Eden, but it was hard to know because Eren had no word for the world inside the walls. The rest of the map was sparse with landmarks. There were what looked like clusters of trees drawn here and there, and while Eden's landscape did feature a breed very tall tree, it had long since gone extinct and the copses pictured no longer stood. At the bottom of the map there was a line, underneath which Eren had written the Edenite words for salt and water. It was probably meant to be the Mediterranean. The alps were drawn there, too, accompanied by another X which Eren had connected to Eden with a meandering dotted line.

This second map was a response to the question of what the last thing Eren remembered was. He wouldn't say anything other than that it was a mountain village and that there had been an expedition there. Levi assumed the dotted line was the path taken, but even so the drawing was so vague there was little hope in finding the place. Hanji said she would do her best, but she didn't sound as optimistic.

"See, aren't you glad I invited Irwin?" she asked with a breathy laugh.

“I doubt *he* is,” Levi answered dryly.

“Why?”

Levi tilted his to look at Hanji’s face. “Maybe the near-death experience.”

Hanji shrugged. “We knew the risks.”

“We?”

“I didn’t put him up to it, if that’s what you’re insinuating,” Hanji was quick to reply. “I just told him about the find, is all.”

“And he just showed up with the exact number of mirrors all on his own.”

“Okay, okay, I might have also sent him some maps of the excavation,” Hanji bit her nail. “But that’s all, I swear. He was the one who suggested we wake up Eren.”

Levi shot her the most skeptical look he had.

“Don’t look at me like that! I’m telling the truth. I didn’t know you he was going to involve you, too, otherwise I would have told you. Besides, it’s like I said, once Irwin gets an idea in his head there’s no stopping him. It’s pretty hot.”

Levi slammed his palms over his ears and shut his eyes for good measure. “On a list of things I didn’t need to hear...”

Hanji flicked his forehead. “Don’t be such a baby.” Levi shot her an angry look. “You look like a pissed off kitten from this angle. But never mind all that! I have a job for you.”

“What is it?” Levi asked grouchily.

“Can you take Eren home with you?”

At this, Levi sat up, all wounds to his pride forgotten. “I always knew you had a few too many screws loose in that head of yours. What do you want me to do with him?”

“Feed him, clothe him, watch him,” Hanji shrugged. “Just until Irwin is out of the hospital. He’s going to try and teach Eren some modern German while they run tests on him, so you should be okay. I’m going to stay here and figure out these maps.” She waved them in the air like they weren’t the most valuable treasure in the world. Levi almost cringed.

The last thing Levi needed was to be responsible for a teenager. “Is there really no one else he can go with?”

“No one I trust more than you,” Hanji purred with an evil grin.

Levi crossed his arms. “That’s doesn’t work on me and you know it.” He paused. “But I’ll do it. When do we leave?”

Chapter 4

Levi rested his cheek bone on his fist and wished he were somewhere else. The car ride from the hospital to the railway station was one thing. Eren couldn't figure out how to unlatch his seatbelt but he learned the controls for rolling down the window quickly enough, after which he spent the rest of the ride with his head hanging out and his hair blowing around in the breeze. The train didn't have windows that opened but it went over twice as fast as the car. Levi had to suffer the looks of the people walking by aimed at the young man with his nose pressed to the glass like a child. Every now and then he would tug at Levi's sleeve and point outside as they passed a field of powerlines or a particularly large lake.

As bad as all that was, actually letting Eren loose on the street was worse. He wanted to examine absolutely everything until Levi was forced to give him a tap upside the head. After that Eren kept up, but he still stared wide-eyed at everything from cyclists to teenagers on their cellphones enough so that he continued to attract weird looks from passers by.

Levi had been planning to leave him in his apartment, but looking between his toaster and ceiling fan he thought better of it. Instead he unpacked his things and tried to find Eren something to wear. Everything he currently wore was borrowed off one of Hanji's grad students and hadn't been washed with proper detergent since the start of the excavation months ago. As Levi had feared, nothing fit. As much as he dreaded taking Eren on public transport again, there was no other choice.

Another train ride later, Levi once again felt like he was walking an over-excited puppy. It took him three times as long as usual to get to the lab. Outside the door, he produced a pen from his coat pocket and wrote 'DO NOT TOUCH ANYTHING' in large letters on the back of Eren's hand.

"Yes," the boy responded much to Levi's relief.

By some heavenly grace, the lab had not fallen apart in Levi's absence. "Stay," he told Eren while pointing to a chair, then vanished into the sanitization area from where he could page the other members of the lab. He needed someone he could trust.

"Petra," he called into the handheld radio. "Can you come to the front?"

A second later, the device lit up with static. "I'm on my way," a female voice replied.

Soon the young woman came in from the airlock. She peeled off her gloves and tossed them in the trash.

"How was your trip?" she asked.

"Eventful," Levi summarized. He noticed she was trying to get a better look at Eren in the other room as she stripped off her protective gear. He was sitting rigidly with his hands on his knees, rocking and tapping his feet while looking around at the wallpaper in awe.

“Is that him?” Petra asked. Levi nodded. “What’s he doing here?”

“Petra,” Levi straightened up as high as he could. It didn’t make too big a difference. “How much do you like shopping?”

Petra narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you asking because I’m the only woman here?”

“No,” Levi backpedaled calmly. “I need someone with a good sense of style to buy him something to wear.”

The woman formerly in the white lab suit but now stripped to jeans a plain blouse raised an eyebrow at him. “If you’re going to stick to stereotypes, why don’t you ask Auruo. He’s gay.”

“Good, take him with you.”

Petra curled her lip in disgust. It was no secret she and Auruo didn’t get along. Levi paged him down anyway.

“Does he talk?” Petra asked, nodding toward Eren who was now inspecting the fluorescent lights.

“He knows a little German,” Levi answered. “And he can read.”

“I hate Germans.” Petra said.

At that moment, Auruo joined them.

“How was your trip?” he asked.

“I already asked him that,” Petra answered.

He was about to retort but Levi cut him off. “I need you two to go shopping with him,” he indicated Eren sitting on his hands but looking under his chair at the electrical outlet.

“Is that him?”

“Yes.”

“He doesn’t speak German, does he?”

“What else would we be teaching him?”

“I hate Germans.”

Levi fixed them both with a cold stare. His voice was colder still. “If you hate them so much it impedes your ability to speak their language, I don’t see what you’re doing in this field. Go collect your things and have a nice life. If you choose to stay, that’s Eren Jaeger in the lobby there. The only words he knows are ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘come’, and ‘I don’t understand’ and his wardrobe consists solely of an outdated military uniform. He has managed to sleep his way through every Franco-Germanic conflict in the last two millennia and that includes both world wars, so check your attitudes at the door and go buy him something to wear.” He gave

them a moment's pause to absorb that all in and check that they were now being sufficiently serious. "Try and keep the price down and fax the receipts directly to Hanji when you're finished. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," the PhD candidates replied in unison.

As much as Levi was curious to see what a pre-industrial revolution human thought of a department store, he simply didn't have the energy left to deal with him. He had a mountain of work to sort through from his time away, and in addition he had been meaning to do some snooping through some old archives. It was going to be a long day.

A long day turned into a long several weeks. Levi was glad to find that Hanji had managed to keep Eren out of the media for the most part. It came at the cost of getting the government involved, but Hanji relayed that Irwin was suspiciously good at dealing with the bureaucratic dogs that phoned every now and then. He was currently in the process of running the investigation dealing with Eren around in circles. The unsigned postcard, presumably sent by Hanji from Luxembourg of all places, bearing a bowdlerized version of the events of the night Eren was freed, and which Levi was to refer to if anyone ever called to ask for a statement, was probably less than legal, but the result of all the effort was that the whole incident was by some miracle deemed a workplace accident. Even charges of negligence were dropped, though when Levi heard this was also Irwin's doing, he said he preferred not to know the details.

Eren himself was a whole different battle. Since he was technically an adult the state didn't have the right to assign him an overseer. They still wanted to take him into custody, but now that he was in France dragging him across country lines could well spark an international incident. While backroom debates raged as to what to do, Hanji managed to file Eren as an artifact in her research under everyone's noses, thereby keeping him in her custody until everything from the site was ready to be turned over to the federal government. What it meant, essentially, was that Eren belonged to the German government, but as long as he was being kept in the name of study and remained safe, he was in Hanji's--and by extension Levi's--care. The arrangement was tenuous at best considering Eren was a person and not a shard of pottery, but it bought them time. Without a precedent for this sort of situation, Hanji had the utmost faith that things could be steered in their favor. Levi could only hope she was right.

Meanwhile, Eren continued to be a handful. When Levi's team complained they couldn't keep watching him, Levi came up with the idea to set him up with a book. Not just any book, mind, but a one of the most complete firsthand accounts of the Dissolution of Eden, the notorious AA47 document. He figured it would be a good idea to catch Eren up on what he missed. Although it was the source of the most agreed upon timeline for the end of Eden and beginning of the common era, AA47 was also highly controversial in its tendency to switch very quickly from great detail on some events to frustratingly vague wording on anything regarding Titans, making it one of the accounts used to argue against their existence. To add to the confusion, the last page was written in a code with no key, and only recognizable as part of the work by the author's flourished signature and date at the bottom of the parchment.

Of course, there was no way Levi was handing Eren the original to handle with his dirty, oily hands. He first tried to introduce him to the digital archive of all Edenite text known thus far, but Eren kept picking up the mouse to examine the underside, so Levi just had all eight hundred and fifty plus pages printed out and bound. When Levi first dropped the volume in front of him, Eren looked like an undergrad just assigned his first term paper. It was a look that said, “you have got to be shitting me, professor” in every language living and dead. He opened it dutifully nonetheless, and within the hour was reading with gusto. At the very least, it kept him out of everyone’s hair.

Meanwhile, Levi set himself the task of conferring Eren’s interview with other records he had in the archive. To his surprise, he found anything that might have mention of Eren’s alleged transformation was too damaged to read, and in one case, clearly intentionally redacted. There was no record of a trial, and although other works continued to reference a series of documents known only as the Hange Reports, no modern scholars knew their actual whereabouts. Levi was dumbfounded that no one had ever noticed this pattern before, but he had to admit it was well hidden if someone didn’t know what they were looking for. With all the other missing chunks of history, it was no surprise that bits go missing here and there. It was only once he set out to look for mentions of Eren than he found the missing bits to be so systematic.

Test results started coming back, too. Hanji sounded let down as she told Levi that absolutely all of Eren’s medical tests came back normal. She had sorely been hoping for at least a higher than normal body temperature, but he was as human as human could be. The good news was that genes tests came back confirming that Eren was from a rare haplogroup which was thought to have once been almost universal in Eden but had since branched off as humanity spread itself back across the continents. The radiocarbon dates came back, too. Assuming the carbon did come straight from the air, Eden Year 853 did fit into the probable time interval. Typology on Eren’s uniform brought a similar date, so it was safe to conclude that the radiocarbon was accurate, which brought with it plenty of implications on its own.

As all this data came in, Levi thought it best to just let Eren adjust to modernity without having to worry about any of it. Watching him figure out modern life was fun in its own way. Once Eren learned how to work a stove, he could cook simple meals for himself. Indoor plumbing continued to fascinate him. Every day he picked up a few more words, but Levi found himself able to pronounce more Edenite words, too. Erd once took Eren out to the quad to teach him how to ride a bike. Levi watched from the window as Eren fell down countless times only to bounce back up and go right back to trying. The smile that lit up his face when he finally made it around the full loop was positively infectious.

At that moment, Grisha Jaeger popped into Levi’s mind.

The phone rang more shrilly than usual.

“You’ll never guess what we found!” Hanji squealed from the receiver.

Levi sighed. Outside, Eren was going for a second lap. On the long stretch, he let go of the handlebars and threw out his arms to both sides like he was flying. Impeccable balance, as expected from Edenite military training. “What is it this time, Hanji?”

“You’ll see. Pack your stuff and bring Eren.”

Chapter 5

It was a testament to the power of time that Eren showed no recognition of the landscape that Hanji was now driving through in her Jeep. Only when they drove past the crumbling visage of Rose on what was left of one of the city gates did he nearly fall out of the speeding vehicle to get a better look.

“Remember this?” Hanji asked as she passed a photocopy of Eren’s hand-drawn map to Eren in the passenger’s seat.

“Eyes on the road!” Levi reminded her from the back seat.

Hanji chuckled. “What road?”

“Yes,” Eren interrupted. “I remember.” He still had a thick, undefinable accent and to speak each word carefully and slowly, and now that he suddenly recognized the stacks of moss-covered rock around him as a city, he was more distracted than ever.

“Good.” Hanji beamed. “Cause that’s where we’re going. Thanks to your tip we found something we’ve been looking for for ages.”

Levi leaned forward and tapped the X on the map. “We are going here,” he translated for Eren, then turned to Hanji. “What did you find?”

“Underground passages!” Hanji drummed on the wheel with glee. “I mean, you’d think we have found some by now, right? Giant predators that only come out in the day? Most mammals deal with that by retreating underground. But not us! Or so we thought. Quite a few of the tunnels are collapsed, but from what we can tell there’s a whole maze of them. We’re in the process of mapping them now.”

“So what do you need me for?” Levi asked.

“Oh, I don’t,” Hanji shrugged. “But I needed Eren. See I’ve been thinking. He marked a spot for us, right? That means there’s something there for us to find, and I don’t think he just meant the tunnels. What if he wanted to show us something in the tunnels?”

“How do you know he wasn’t indicating something aboveground?”

“A hunch.” Hanji glanced sideways at Eren. “I was wondering why he didn’t give us any landmarks to work with. When we found the tunnels, something just clicked.”

She turned out to be right. When taken to the mouth of the tunnel, Eren gladly lead the way with flashlight in hand. Levi and Hanji went with him. For the most part, Eren walked with purpose. He took a few wrong turns and had to double back once or twice, and at one point the party ran into a partially collapsed part of the tunnel. Fortunately, there was just enough space for one person at a time to squeeze through. The three walked in silence for a while, Eren’s flashlight pointing straight ahead, Hanji’s darting around the walls, and Levi’s at the

floor to avoid stepping in anything foul. It was so damp Levi covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve at the mere thought of the mold that could be growing down here.

“How’s Irwin doing?” he finally decided to ask.

“Oh, better,” Hanji said. “Much better. He’s on crutches now.”

“Ah,” Levi answered. He stared at the back of Eren’s head for a moment before speaking again. “Do you think he’ll want to take... you know?” He indicated with his chin. “Custody.”

“Why?” Hanji asked slyly. “Have you taken a liking to him?”

“Of course not,” Levi lied.

Before he could say more, Eren broke into a run. Levi and Hanji had no choice but to give chase. There was doorway up ahead whose door had long since rotted away. Eren stopped so suddenly after the threshold that Levi almost bumped into him. When he stepped around him, he could see what made the boy stop dead in his tracks.

They had all stumbled upon a large room, or what was left of one. Part of the roof had collapsed ages ago. The remains of rusted iron chains littered the floor. In the center of the room was a crystal, and in the crystal was a girl.

After a long and deathly silence, Hanji unclipped the radio from the belt.

“Note down my coordinates,” she whispered without taking her eyes off crystal. “We just found Eve. Over.”

As if woken from some trance by the break in the silence, Eren screamed. Levi wasn’t listening to catch what it was. Without warning the boy dashed forward. Before Levi could so much as move to stop him he pulled some kind of rotted beam from the wreckage at the back of the room and heaved it against the crystal. The wood shattered. The ceiling groaned.

“Watch out!” Hanji shrieked. Her flashlight was pointed at the sagging ceiling above Eren. Eren, half the beam still clutched in his hands, followed where the light was pointing. When he looked up a small waterfall of dirt and dust poured down on his face.

Levi was moving before he realized he had made up his mind. It was no use; he was too far away and too slow. With a great clatter and cloud of dirt the ceiling gave way. Levi threw up his hands to shield his face. The last thing he saw were Eren’s wide blue eyes fixed on him in terror.

When the noise stopped, he could hear Hanji coughing behind him. He cracked open an eye but saw nothing but dust floating on sunshine. It was so bright after so long in the dark.

There was a second person coughing too. Levi squinted. There, not a meter from the rubble, sat Eren, filthy from head to toe but seemingly unharmed. Levi didn’t have time to be relieved. His eyes darted to the crystal lit up with light.

Four. Five. Six.

“Eren!”

Seven. Eight. Nine.

“Zoe, *run!*”

Ten.

Levi stood frozen to the spot. This was it, he realized. The end. All he could do was squeeze his eyes shut and wait for the hiss of steam.

Instead, he heard Eren swear. He cracked an eye open and saw him pick up a rock and pitch it at the crystal. There was nothing. The Eve’s eyes were closed. Eren yelled something else and resorted to his fists.

Levi looked behind him. Hanji had pressed herself against the wall, but now looked back and mirrored Levi’s confused expression. They both looked to Eren.

Levi stood. His knees were shaking. Each step he took felt like at any second he would step on a landmine. He took hold of Eren’s wrist when he wound back for another swing. Eren’s knuckles were bloody.

“Stop,” Levi told him quietly. Eren rounded on him with eyes full of anger and desperation.

“Stop,” Levi repeated more loudly. Eren looked from him to Hanji coming forward to join them. He and Levi watched as Hanji took the stethoscope from around her neck, put it in her ears, and pressed it to the glass. No one moved until Hanji let out a breath and dropped her shoulders. The look on her face told Levi everything he needed to know, but Eren had no way of understanding.

“Out,” he struggled with his limited vocabulary, desperate to make the others understand.

“Annie. Annie Leonhardt. I. Know. Annie Leonhardt. Out. *Please.*”

Levi held out his hand for the stethoscope. Hanji handed it to him without a word. He put the tips in Eren’s ears and pressed the diaphragm to the crystal. Eren just stared at him, confused. Levi pressed the diaphragm to Eren’s chest instead. The boy’s eyebrows shot up instantly and he held his breath. Levi let him listen for a few seconds before holding the diaphragm to his own chest. At last, he pressed the diaphragm to the crystal. This Eren understood.

“Dead,” Levi said. A new word for him to learn.

Chapter 6

Eren didn't say much of anything to anyone for the next couple of days. He would eat when food was placed next to him but otherwise sat in the field tent with his nose in AA47 until well into the night. He only took breaks to sleep and peel back the bandages on his knuckles as if he expected the wounds to be healed. Levi tried once to sit with him but could think of nothing comforting to say. Hanji also tried to distract Eren by showing him her underground maps while trying to explain how a compass worked, but he showed very little interest.

"Maybe you should take him home," Hanji suggested one day.

Levi looked around the rocky field of reeds and wildflowers that had once been a capital city.
"I would if I could."

"You know what I mean."

He did know. Taking Eren out of Eden was probably for the best.

A minute later he was pulling back the tent flap.

"Time to go," he said as he stuck his head inside. "We're going back to France, Eren." Eren was not in his usual corner. "Eren?" He wasn't in the rest of the tent, either.

Levi stepped out and looked around. There were a few researchers here and there, but no teenager.

"Has anybody seen Eren?"

No one had. One ran to fetch Hanji. The others checked around the tent and in the grass nearby.

"He couldn't have gotten far," Hanji said as she sprinted up the ramp from the underground. Levi knew that wasn't true. Eren had been left unattended for hours now. The grass was only waist height, but all around the horizon was only swaying weeds.

The same must have dawned on Hanji when she made it up to the surface. "I'll check underground!" She turned to descend again but changed her mind. "Levi, catch!" She pitched him her car keys. "I have my maps. You take the trail."

The trail in question was the same one they took coming in, nothing more than two tire marks worn into the ground. Levi had only ever driven on paved roads, and not since he was Eren's age, but he pushed the vehicle as fast as it would go while scanning the grass around. It didn't take long for him to spot the figure wearing a backpack running through the tire treads in the distance.

"Eren!" Levi leaned out the side of the car and slowed down behind the boy. Eren glanced behind him and sped up.

Levi pursed his lips. The car gave a jolt as he shifted gears and drove off the beaten path and around Eren to cut him off. This stopped Eren in his tracks, but he threw up an arm to shield his face. It was no use; Levi had already seen.

He cut the engine, jumped from the car, and pulled Eren's arm out the way. His hands were covered in blood. Up close it was evident that it was all his own, oozing from the puncture wounds that dotted from his wrist down to his first knuckle. The blood was smeared around his mouth, too, and washed down his chin with tears and sweat. He was clutching a compass in one hand and a bloodied piece of paper in the other.

"What have you done to yourself?" Levi asked in disbelief. "Did you do this with your teeth?"

Eren refused to look at him. Levi didn't even think it was possible to bite through one's own skin. He wanted to shake him.

"What possessed you? Where did you plan to go?"

Still staring at the ground to his left, Eren held out the scrunched paper. Levi didn't let go of his wrist but accepted the paper by one of its clean corners and shook it out. It was the second map Eren had drawn, the one showing a path to the Alps.

"Do you have any idea how far this is?!"

Eren's brow furrowed but he nodded.

"Were you planning to run the whole way?!"

Eren tried to tug his hand back. Levi wouldn't let him, and instead tried to pull him back to the car. Eren resisted.

"I'm taking you back to France," Levi said in a tone one did not argue with. "Get in."

"No," Eren mumbled. There was a rage bubbling under the surface.

Levi looked at him. Really looked. Then he sighed.

"At least let me bandage your hands."

Eren looked at his hands like he was expecting something to happen. A drop of blood fell in the dirt instead. Eren stared at the dark stain it left on the ground. For a second, Levi thought he was going to bolt again. Instead, he held his hands out with the resignation of a guilty criminal.

Levi sat him in the passenger's seat and used the gauze and bandage from the first aid kit in the glove compartment. The only sound was the wind rustling through the grass and the occasional sniffle from Eren. When Levi finished one of his hands and looked up, he realized how tired Eren looked all of a sudden. It was not from his run. This was not the boy who pressed his face against the glass on the train a month ago. He looked so much older.

"I would go with you there now if I could," Levi told him. "But there are too many mountains, do you understand? We don't know where to look."

With the hand Levi had already bandaged, Eren rummaged around in his backpack. Levi saw that he had planned to take more than a compass and the map; he had managed to steal provisions as well. The biggest item by far was the book. Eren pulled it onto his lap, flipped to a section near the beginning, and turned it so Levi could read.

Eden Year 853. 49th expedition beyond the Walls. Lead by Commander Ervin Smith of the Scouting Legion. 500 cavalry. 100 spare horses. 2000 air canisters. 3500 spare blades. 10,000 rations.

Troops set out from outpost on Wall Maria established year prior heading southwest along Wall Maria. From Shiganshina, headed south for 150km. Heeded advice to travel by night, rest in giant trees by day. Changed course to...

Levi skimmed ahead.

On fourth night arrived at the Steps. Used Scouting Legion's secret weapon to move soldiers up mountain. Left 30 troops with injured and horses at the base. Battle for Humanity at mountain's peak. Total casualties for humanity: 462.

Oh, it was this passage. It had been causing historians to tear their hair out for centuries. About seventy years ago, a woman named Braus had been mad enough to actually follow the path detailed, but it dead-ended on a sheer cliffside. She had hypothesized that there were enough handholds for a 15m Titan to scale it, but there were so few who even believed in the Titans' existence that attributing to them the yet unheard of ability to climb got her laughed out of the field. AA47 made no other mention of a secret weapon and did not elaborate on what could easily be called the most pivotal battle in human history. All other records of it were lost or too damaged.

"You want to go here?" Levi asked.

"I was," Eren answered. "I know..." he searched for the word. "Track." He looked down at his hands. "Remember going. Fighting. After, nothing."

Levi studied his face. On the one hand, it was obvious to him that there would be nothing on that mountaintop to find. Maybe some rusted gear or a couple of skeletons if they were lucky. It would be a lot of work for nothing.

But on the other hand, Eren already had less than nothing. His home was gone. His friends. His time. The world had gone on without him and left him behind. Everyone he had ever known had been dead for nearly two thousand years.

Levi finished bandaging Eren's second hand and took it between his own.

"I promise I will take you there," he said. He peered under Eren's hung head to look him in the eye. "I promise."

He realized Eren didn't know the word 'promise'. He wrote the Edenite equivalent in the dirt with his boot. Literally, it meant to swear one's life to a cause.

"I promise," he repeated. "But you have to come back to France with me first."

Eren seemed to actually consider it. After what felt like an eternity, he nodded his head. Levi let out the breath he had been holding.

"Alright then, buckle up. We have to let Hanji know you're safe."

Back in the lab, Eren's state did improve somewhat. He still spent a lot of time reading, sometimes what seemed like the same passages over and over again, but he would also talk to Levi's team and Gunther swore he made him laugh once. In the meantime, a massive late-summer heat wave hit southern Europe, producing record temperatures and flooding valleys to the south with snowmelt. Eren had never been more in awe than the day Auruo showed him how to work an air conditioner.

As the heat was easing off, Levi finally received the phone call he had been waiting for.

"I had to pull some mad strings for this," Hanji began. "I seriously hope you appreciate the favors I had to call in."

"Did you do it?"

"We're going to take a helicopter," she explained. "I hope Eren isn't afraid of heights."

Eren was far from it. On the contrary, Levi preferred to sit in the middle of the craft, avoid looking out, and feign disinterest at anything anyone wanted to show him. Once Eren was thoroughly engrossed in the view, Hanji scooted up next to Levi.

"We need to talk," she said in French so Eren couldn't understand what was coming at him through the shared speakers. "It's about you-know-who."

"Can you be more specific?" Levi asked.

"Irwin doesn't think we have a lot of time before the bureaucrats sort something out with him."

"He better have a back-up plan then," Levi said.

"Oh, he does. I just wasn't sure if you were up for it." Hanji tried to adjust her glasses, but found the protective goggles in the way. She fidgeted with the strap instead.

"What is it?" Levi was willing to do anything.

"Adult adoption."

Almost anything. "Are you serious?"

"It'll make it so you have custody right to him before the government does," Hanji explained.
"It's perfect."

"It's quite the commitment."

"Irwin says he'll do it if you don't want to."

Levi suddenly felt like his tongue was too big for his mouth. "I need to think about it."

He was not someone who liked having a lot of connections. He enjoyed being able to disappear into his work for days at a time and having no one notice his absence. It wasn't loneliness to him, it was freedom. It meant that the only person he had to worry about disappointing was himself. Eren may have burrowed his way into his life, but as much as he had come to enjoy his company Levi had never seen the arrangement as permanent. He didn't want to let him go, but he didn't want to accept the responsibility either. He had just never seen himself as a caretaker. He felt like the role would fit him about as well as a shoe on the wrong foot. More importantly, Eren deserved better. He had already had more than his fair share of terrible fathers.

At that moment the helicopter landed none too gently. Eren was out before the craft had fully settled. He had his backpack with him always; he hardly ever went anywhere without AA47 these days. Levi trudged along through the snow not far behind. The drifts went up past his knees and almost to his waist. At this altitude, nothing melted, but judging from the slight slushiness in the snow's consistency, this year might have been an exception.

The view was breathtaking. On a clear day like this it might have once been possible to see Eden, but with no walls standing it was hard to know for sure. Today, towns and farms dotted the landscape. Up on the ledge, massive boulders lay scattered around, some evidently torn from the cliffside itself. Here and there, a few looked like they might have been chipped by Edenite military maneuver gear, but the wind had buffed away at the imperfections until they were nothing but odd dimples in the rock.

They were only out for about ten minutes when Levi spotted something poking out of the snow. It could have been a branch of some kind, but he could have sworn the twigs branching off of it made it look like a hand. He was about to check what it was when he heard Hanji scream. She was standing over something thirty meters back and trembling. Levi made sure that Eren wasn't about to run off and then went to see what it was.

When he made it over to her, he wished he hadn't. Instinctively, he pulled his scarf over his nose.

"Is that a corpse?" he asked.

"An- an ice man." Hanji was practically drooling. "Look at this condition!" He didn't look in that great condition. The yellow skin was stretched taut over the bone. "It looks like he's even got some textile left on him!"

"Disgusting."

"Incredible!" She was whimpering now. "He must have been frozen not long after death. Look here, decomposition has *barely* set in. He must have just been exposed this past *week*!"

Levi didn't have the stomach for such things. He didn't think Hanji noticed him excuse himself and walk back to Eren, or perhaps she was just too caught up to care. As he dragged his feet through the snow, the sick realization settled in his gut that there might be more of those things hidden, invisible underfoot. There had been a battle here of over 400 casualties on one side alone. If one froze, so could the rest. He was suddenly seeing hands and feet popping up like daisies out of the corner of his eye. Only some were his imagination.

Eren was not far from where he had left him. He was looking down at something Levi couldn't see until he got closer. Levi hoped it wasn't what he thought it was, but all hope was in vain. He had to sprint the last few meters to stop Eren from reaching down and touching the desiccated remains.

"Don't," Levi hissed at him as he grabbed his wrist.

Eren whispered a word in his native language that Levi didn't recognize. He didn't take his eyes off the body. Unlike the one Hanji found, this one lay as if deliberately placed. Her hands--it looked more female than the last--were folded across her chest, and someone had thought to close her eyes for her. The remains of a scarf were plastered stiffly to her neck. The color had all but faded, but it might have been red once.

"Mikasa," Eren repeated. His voice wavered. He tried to touch her again and again Levi held him back. Instead he merely collapsed to his knees. His eyes were dry but absolutely huge.

"Did you know her?" Levi asked.

"Dead," Eren mumbled.

The silence that followed was too much. "Yes, dead."

"I promised," he continued. "Friend. Sister." He paused for a moment to search for a word before resorting to one in his native tongue. The closest translation would be something like 'protector', but it held deeper meaning than that. In some texts it could mean 'lover', but that was not right either. It was someone who would die for you, an Achilles to your Patroclus. "I promised. We would meet. After. And then I--" He stopped suddenly and looked around with a frantic look in his eye.

"Armin," he whispered in his native language. "Where's Armin?"

It took Levi a minute to translate. "What?"

"Armin," Eren scrambled to his feet desperately only to fall back to his knees and dig snow out of the way by the armful at the female's side. "Armin Arlert!"

Levi watched him in confusion. "It's right here, isn't it?" he asked, giving Eren's backpack a tug.

Eren just hurriedly shrugged off the straps and kept looking. Levi ripped off his glove with his teeth so he could unzip the pack. Careful not to get it wet, he pulled out the only contents, AA47, and flipped it to the last page.

“Look here,” he said, taking Eren by the shoulder. Eren spun around to see where he was pointing.

At the bottom of the last page of AA47 was the author’s signature and date.

Armin Arlert, Year 47 of the Common Era.

Eren lifted his shaking hand to touch the page.

“Armin,” he said again, this time in a shaky whisper.

“He was the strategic adviser to three consecutive kings,” Levi explained. “He’s almost solely responsible for the success of mankind’s recolonization effort after the Dissolution of the Walls. It is likely that everything would have fallen to anarchy without him.”

Eren didn’t appear to be listening. Lower lip trembling, he held out his hands for the book. Levi obliged him. He held it for a moment, stroked the author’s name, and then the tears came. First one, then two, then a waterfall of fat droplets cascaded down the boy’s face. The sobs that ripped from his throat sounded strange. Then Levi realized he was laughing. He was hugging the book to his chest, crying and sobbing and laughing all in one, his face a mess of tears and snot.

For the longest time, Levi was unsure of what to do. The only thing he could think of was to pull a handkerchief from his sleeve and offer it to Eren. Eren blinked up at it. For a moment it seemed like he was going to take it, but then a huge smile spread across his face. He bypassed the handkerchief and threw his arms around Levi’s middle instead. Levi froze statue still at the contact. He looked around for someone to help, someone to tell him how to deal with the situation, but Hanji was nowhere to be seen. They were all alone. A light snow started to drift down.

Without realizing it, Levi had allowed himself to relax. It went against all logic. He hated people touching him, but for no good reason he had found an exception here in a world of ice and death. He placed a hand on Eren’s back and the hold on him tightened in return. With no one to see it, Levi smiled. He wrapped his other arm around Eren’s head and let his eyes drift closed.

Holding him was pleasant and warm. When Levi opened his eyes again, the first thing he saw was the body of Eren’s protector. Hanji’s question materialized in his mind. The answer was now much clearer.

I got it from here, he thought at the frozen warrior.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Eren slapped a piece of paper down on Levi's desk. Levi was in no hurry to look up. He was in the midst of making his way through a photocopy of a water-damaged document, trying to fill in blanks. It was grueling work.

"What is it?" he asked when he reached the end of a sentence.

"The Arlert Code," Eren answered smugly.

Now Levi looked up. "You solved it?" Eren had only begun trying to decypher the code on the last page of AA47 a few hours ago. Some had spent years trying to no avail.

In reply, Eren just slid the paper closer. Levi eyed it curiously but did not take it.

"First, tell me how." He wasn't about to admit he had once tried his hand at it, too.

"Armin invented it when we were kids," Eren answered. "To pass notes. In school."

He grinned like an idiot when he said it. Levi felt like the butt of a joke.

"I'll take a look at it later," he grumbled and waved Eren off. Eren continued to look smug all the way out the door. Levi pretended to be absorbed in his work until he was sure the boy was gone. Only then did he pick up the page and begin to read.

Dear Eren,

Though no time has passed for you, it was been forty-eight years since you saved the human race. If it was not for you plugging the gap in the wall, mankind would have been wiped off the face of the earth along with the Titans when The First Titan, or the thing we knew as the Beast Titan, was killed. I have tried everything in my power to wake you, but our current technology has no way of breaking through the outer layers of your crystal. Since you are reading this now, I have to assume mankind has progressed far enough to allow such feats. No doubt I will also be dead by the time your read this, as already I feel my time drawing near.

To make sure that you are safe where you sleep, and to ensure that when you awaken you will not be treated as the monster some thought you to be in our time, I decided many years ago to erase Titans from our history. I obviously cannot undo the mark they have left on our past, but I can do enough to seed doubt. I theorize that the blast that destroyed the Titans eradicated all but the last traces the Titan blood from your system as well. I hope whenever you are, you are safe.

1. Ymir Renz: Died in defense of humanity, age unknown, Eden Year 853.

2. *Historia "Christa" Reiss: Head Priestess of the New Church of the Three Sisters.*
Died of natural causes, age 61, Common Era Year 42.
3. *Sasha Braus: Established first civilian settlement outside the Walls. Died defending storehouse from bear, age 59, Common Era Year 39. Succeeded by 4 children, 2 grandchildren.*
4. *Connie Springer: Died in defense of humanity, age 18, Eden Year 853.*
5. *Jean Kirschtein: Commander of Scouting Legion for 27 years. Went down with ship at sea, age 47, Common Era Year 28. Succeeded by 7 children, 1 grandchild.*
6. *Annie Leonhardt: In custody. Status unknown. Not moved since initial arrest. If you can, please find her. Make sure she is alright.*
7. *Bertholdt Hoover: Fought in defense of humanity. Executed as war criminal despite human lives saved, age 19, Eden Year 354. The death of the last of the Colossal Titans caused the Dissolution of the Walls and marks the start of the Common Era.*
8. *Reiner Braun: Died in defense of humanity, age 18, Eden Year 853.*
9. *Mikasa Ackerman: Died in defense of humanity, age 18, Eden year 853.*

We all send you our love and gratitude and will be with you always.

Armin Arlert, Common Era Year 47.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your fantastic comments! I come back to this page every time I feel down just to read them. They absolutely make my day every time.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!